

CRISIS PLAN

This plan establishes guidelines for crisis communication in the event of issues like an unusual disease outbreak, a natural disaster with public health and human services involvement, or a human services problem on the level of the failure of our automated child support collection system. This plan remains in effect until the State, or other entity such as CDC, activates its Joint Information Center. Once the JIC is activated, then the plan is no longer in effect.

Triggering Point:

Public Affairs Director, or designee (referred to as PAD), declares the office to be in crisis mode. That means that every staffer is totally devoted to the crisis issue at hand.

PAD informs senior staff and all division directors that the public affairs office is now in crisis mode. No non-emergency work will be accepted for review, edit etc. during this time. Division directors are asked to relay this information to their staff. Outside meetings not related to the crisis should be rescheduled.

The following message is transmitted electronically to all Division Directors/Senior Staff:

“Due to (describe the current situation), the DHHS public affairs office is now operating in its crisis communication mode. That means that the public information officers are totally devoted to the (describe the situation). Please do not submit any non-emergency items for review to this public affairs office. Please hold on to those items, until further notice. Once this situation is resolved, we will let you know. In the interim, please bear with us. Thank you.”

All PIOs should also set up an autoreply on their email account, which explains that this issue is the top priority and that we may be slow to respond to other emails. The email should read:

“Your message is important to me, but I am currently working on the (describe the ongoing situation). I normally would be able to respond to your message within hours, but the current situation means I will not be able to respond as quickly as I would like to your message. I will respond as quickly as possible, but it could be (fill in possible time period), before I am able to respond. In the meantime – if this is an emergency – please call the public affairs office at 919 733 9190.”

Because voice mail can often go unanswered during a crisis, no callers will be sent to voice mail during the crisis. Administrative staff will take callers’ names, phone numbers and affiliations. Callers who are from other divisions with non-emergency needs will be told that the office is operating in crisis mode on the particular ongoing issue. Reporters calling about issues other than the current crisis situation will be told that

the entire public affairs staff is dealing with the crisis and the call may not be returned very quickly.

Delineation of Duties:

PAD is the public affairs chief point of contact during a crisis. PAD will sit in on all relevant briefings. PAD is in charge of assigning duties to other PIOs. PAD serves as liaison to Governor's Communication Office and DHHS senior staff. Other duties that will be assigned to PIOs by PAD are:

Logistics Officer: Sets up media briefings, issues media advisories on media briefings, ensures that conference call lines are in place, ensures that all news releases are properly distributed, coordinates activities with Citizen Services and other relevant offices, ensures that professional staff see media coverage of the ongoing event, maintain up-to-date list of people other than the media who need to be in the loop (for instance, local health or DSS directors, hospital PIOs etc.).

Writing Officer: Drafts news releases, fact sheets, talking points, and briefings as assigned by PAD.

Call Triage Officer: In charge of taking all phone calls, making sure they are handled in an appropriate and timely manner. (Note: administrative staff will answer calls and give "pink sheets" to the call triage officer).

WEB coordinator: Posts releases, fact sheets on WEB, creates new web sites as necessary to address the event, assists call triage and writing officers as needed.

Hispanic/Latino outreach: Ensures that relevant news releases and fact sheets are translated into Spanish and distributed to appropriate Spanish-language media. Backs up logistics officer, call triage and writing officers as needed.

Activities:

Initial determination:

Once crisis is declared by PAD, then the PAD will meet with appropriate program staff to determine the following:

- Program staff spokespeople (during times of crisis, it is best if program staff do the talking with media so that public is hearing from the "experts" on the issue.). Unless the division director of the affected division determines otherwise, then division director should be lead spokesperson.
- Timing/scheduling of media briefings.
- Determine what special publications (fact sheets, web sites) are necessary to help communicate during this crisis.

The PAD will then report back to the Public Affairs Office and assign duties.

Media Briefings

Professional program staff time is limited, but we want to make sure that the public gets information as quickly as it is available. Regular media briefings will be scheduled to

give professional staff the opportunity to relay accurate timely information to the public through the media.

- Briefings will include a conference call “meet me” line to give media from outlying areas the opportunity to participate.
- Briefing format will include an opening statement from the lead professional communicator. This written statement will be provided to attending media and faxed to other media.
- Where possible a simple fact sheet on the issue will be developed and distributed at the briefings. The fact sheet will be updated for each media briefing.

Notifying others

- Citizen Services must receive notification of all events prior to the media receiving the notice.
- Local agencies (DSS, Public Health etc), should receive notification prior the media. Where possible, the local agency should be able to review any documents prior to their release.
- DHHS Senior Staff, Division and Office Directors, the Governor’s Communication Office, and other relevant offices should receive notification prior to the media.

Notifying the media

As soon as the crisis has been called, the public affairs office will notify the media, telling them that regular media briefings will be scheduled.

All media notification during the crisis should occur in the following fashion:

- AP receives the first copy, via fax and email and a follow-up call is made to make sure they received the document and placed it on their daybook
- All media in the affected counties will also receive a fax & email copy and a follow-up call to ensure the fax was received. (Note: this includes television stations that cover a particular area but may not be based in the affected county. For instance, if the event is in Orange County, then all Triangle television stations will receive this notification.
- Email to all media outlets on the email list.
- Fax to all media outlets on the fax list (the email and fax lists are redundant, but the redundant system ensures that the notice is received, since many media outlets still prefer fax over email or visa versa).

Public Affairs Internal Briefing

The PAD will hold routine a.m. and p.m. briefings with public affairs staff to ensure that everyone is aware of the current situation and on-task.

Office Hours

DHHS Public Affairs normally functions 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. Those hours will be expanded, depending on the crisis. Staff will accrue comp time for extra hours worked during the crisis, subject to PAD approval.

Crisis Ends/Evaluation

After conferring with appropriate program professional staff, the PAD will call an end to crisis mode. In order to alleviate mental health problems that may have occurred as a result of the lengthy hours worked during the crisis, PAD will begin to schedule comp time “days off” immediately for staff. It is imperative that staff get rest after the intense crisis is over.

An evaluation will be conducted to review what happened and determine how that outcome will affect work during a future crisis.